A photograph of a modern desert house. The building features a prominent stone wall and a large, smooth rock resting on a stone base. In the foreground, there are stone steps leading up to the building. The background shows a hillside with sparse vegetation under a blue sky with light clouds. The overall scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

Desert Rose

ARCHITECTURE BLOOMS IN
THE SONORAN DESERT

Jacqueline Swartz



In the Sonoran Desert near Scottsdale, Arizona, two legendary sites blend architecture with nature: Taliesin West and Cosanti, the retreats and studios of Frank Lloyd Wright and Paolo Soleri. These celebrated architects shared more than just a desert: In the late 1940s, the 28-year-old Soleri, newly graduated from the Politecnico in Torino, Italy, wrote to Wright asking to study with him. The answer was yes, and Soleri came to Arizona, studied with Wright for a year and a half and then took up residence nearby.

Wright was captivated by the Sonoran Desert when he came to Arizona to oversee designs for the Biltmore Hotel, and Taliesin West became his winter house and studio in 1937. Today, it is considered one of his crowning achievements and draws 100,000 visitors each year.

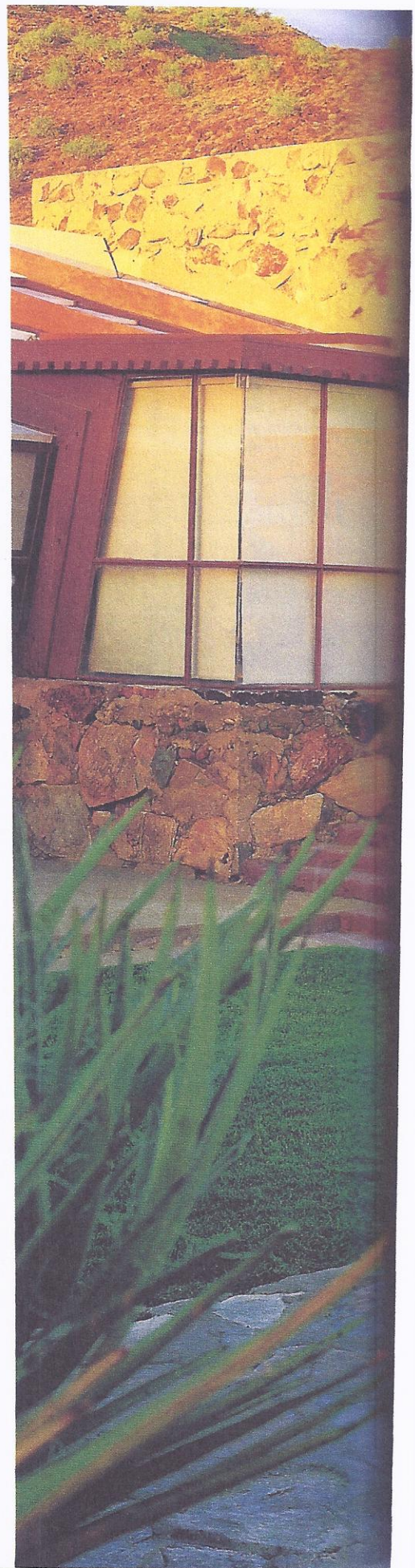
Overlooking the desert valley, the 600-acre Taliesin West is a harmonious assemblage of low-rise buildings, many with overhanging roofs that deflect the searing rays of the sun. The horizontal emphasis of heavy desert stone and thick redwood beams leads to terraces, walkways and long pools. The buildings display a heart-stopping sense of Wright's talent, astonishing in their artistry and harmony with nature. This is surely what Wright meant by organic architecture, and when he said the place "belonged to the Arizona desert as though it had stood there during creation."

America's best-known architect was in his early 70s when he moved to his winter quarters in the desert but he had not lost any of his extraordinary creative powers; he

designed the Guggenheim Museum and other buildings during those winter sojourns. He died in 1959, just short of his 92nd birthday.

Taliesin West offers six well-organized tours, lasting from one to three hours, which can be purchased in advance or at the gift shop stocked with crafts and books. (No self-guided tours are allowed.) The knowledgeable guides refer to the architect as 'Mr. Wright' and talk about his quixotic personality along with his buildings and theories. His spirit still seems to inhabit the grounds—the buildings, sculpture gardens and furniture, all of which he designed, right down to the sconces. Taliesin West is not a museum — it remains an architecture school as well as the home of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation and Archives (franklloydwright.org).

Wright was creative and often iconoclastic, yet at the same time rather formal. Even in his desert camp he would dress in a jacket and tie. He also enjoyed the high life, inviting movie stars to dinners, where students in bow ties served as waiters; he held soirees in his theatre, with its seats upholstered in his signature colour, Cherokee red. You can still sit in those seats today. You can see his office. You can even peer into Wright's bedroom to admire the stunning simplicity of the stone walls and the few pieces of furniture and coloured pillows. (His third wife, the Russian-born Olgivanna, had her own quarters, where she lived on and off until her death in 1985.)



Seated in Wright-designed chairs, visitors feel like special guests in the dramatic **Garden Room**, the 56-foot-long living room covered by a sloping, translucent roof that leads to a garden.

A mere five miles away is Paolo Soleri's Cosanti. The posh suburb of **Paradise Valley** has grown up around it but you'd never know it if you follow the narrow road to the sign that says, 'Soleri, Visitors Welcome.' Here you will come upon an eccentric collection of hobbit-like buildings and craft studios; some are open-air, others so low that they are half-submerged in the earth. This five-acre spread is where the Italian-born architect, artist and ceramicist Paolo Soleri still lives and works in a studio he built 55 years ago.

Cosanti, designated an **Arizona Historic Site**, is a must-see if you're in the Scottsdale area. It is like the architecture of Gaudí gone to the extreme – trippy structures, many of them without walls. The ceramics studio, for instance, has what looks like an angled stained-glass roof and seems to rest on stilts. There are paths to explore and huge sculptures to marvel at.

And of course there are the bells, the famous Soleri bronze and ceramic bells and wind chimes. It's hard to think of a better souvenir or gift. Small bells cost \$35 while large bell sculptures run into the thousands of dollars. Each one has a different sound. Go in the morning, when the bronze bells are being poured in the small outdoor foundry (cosanti.com).

The casual feel of the place and its founder couldn't be more different from the grandiose Wright's winter quarters. Unlike Wright, Soleri has always lived a frugal and quietly bohemian life. Stories differ about why Wright asked Soleri to leave Taliesin West, but they have nothing to do with Soleri's work. In fact, Wright referred a client to him and Soleri then married her daughter, Colly. After a few years in Italy, where Soleri built a ceramics factory, the couple moved back to Arizona. Colly died in 1982 but Soleri, who turned 93 last June, still remains at Cosanti. Revered by his followers, he is more 'Paolo' than 'Mr. Soleri.' He has written extensively, coined the term 'arcology' (a combination of architecture and ecology), and is now credited with being decades ahead of his time in thinking about sustainable urban communities and alternative forms of energy. Yet he has never been a prolific builder like Wright. Soleri's life's work is **Arcosanti**, an urban experiment in the high desert 65 miles away. Attracting



architecture and design students for temporary stays, it has become a kind of never-completed ideal, and with only 56 permanent residents, it's a far cry from the 5,000 Soleri envisioned. Last year Soleri handed over the reins of his foundation to Jeff Stein, former dean of the Boston Architectural College. Tours are available (arcosanti.org).

At Cosanti, if you're lucky (as I was), Soleri himself, a sprite-like character, will emerge from his small house for a chat. A prolific writer and theorist, he can talk about his ahead-of-his-time theories of urban living (no cars, high-density but humanized living, with nature nearby), or his signature technique of earthcasting – pouring a thin shell of concrete into a pre-shaped earthen mould, then excavating the earth once the concrete sets. (This technique won a gold medal for craftsmanship from the American Institute of Architects.) But this afternoon he impishly suggests it's time for a drink. "I'm Italian but in my old age I sometimes like beer instead of wine."

There was much to toast in December 2010, when Soleri's pedestrian bridge and plaza in Scottsdale were dedicated. He has designed bridges for 60 years, and has shown them in exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art, but this is the only one that has been built. In one of his Sketchbooks, published by MIT Press, Soleri wrote:

"The bridge is as cogent in the psychic realm as it is in the physical world. The bridge is a symbol of confidence and trust. It is a communications medium as much as a connector."

Soleri's 130-foot-long pedestrian bridge joins the Scottsdale waterfront to the south bank of the **Arizona Canal**, linking restaurants, the **Old Town** and the huge **Fashion Square** mall. It features two 64-foot brushed steel pylons; the shadows they cast indicate solar noon and the summer and winter solstices. And there's more: A 22,000-square-foot plaza includes 11 earthcast panels designed by Soleri. The website, soleribridge.com, serves as a one-stop shop for all things Soleri.

Success at 90? Maybe it's the desert air. After all, Frank Lloyd Wright began living at Taliesin West when he was 73; at 80, in a meeting with Soleri, he claimed (quite rightly) that he could still shake buildings out of his sleeve. Some of Soleri's ideas and drawings, so relevant to an era trying to go green, could yet be translated into finished structures. For now, the good fortune for visitors to Scottsdale is that Taliesin West and Cosanti are there to experience.



PHOTOS

Left: Gift Shop at Cosanti
Above: Garden Room at
Taliesin West

Scottsdale's walkable neighbourhoods

The Scottsdale Convention and Visitors Bureau recently launched architectureinscottsdale.com, a guide to 30 of the city's most distinctive buildings, with a map of a walking tour and free trolley route.

Nearby is Fashion Square (fashionsquare.com), the Southwest's largest shopping mall.

After experiencing Taliesin West and Cosanti, and their connection with the primeval Sonoran Desert, you can't stay just anywhere. **The Boulders** (theboulders.com), a Waldorf Astoria resort outside Scottsdale, is a series of *casitas* (little houses) set in 1,600 acres of unspoiled desert. Formations of granite boulders several million years old are everywhere, as are cacti and desert creatures such as jackrabbits and lizards. Next door is the **Golden Door Spa**.

By contrast, in the centre of town is **The Saguaro** (thesaguaro.com), part of the **Joie de Vivre Hotels'** whimsical boutique hotel collection. Moderately priced, it's a revelation in design that gets by on simplicity and colour, and features **Distrito**, a contemporary Mexican restaurant and bar headed by noted chef Jose Garces.

Not far from the **Soleri Bridge**, the award-winning **FnB Restaurant** (fnbrestaurant.com) offers a locally sourced, farm-focused menu that changes weekly.